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Cataloging and Subject Analysis of the Incunabula Collection of the Vasyl Stefanyk National Scientific Library of Ukraine in Lviv: MARC21, Metadata and Digital Access

Abstract: This article examines the problem-oriented database Incunabula Collection of the Vasyl Stefanyk Library, launched in 2024. The research focuses on the methodology of bibliographic description were performed „de visu”, with historical provenance as well as subject access analysis of 55 incunabula records performed through technical systematic cataloging in MARC21.

Consistency of subject headings with international dictionaries, such as Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and basic details of access to descriptions and copies of the editions and copies recorded in ISTC and GW ensures that the Ukrainian collection is available to the rest of the scholarly community. It focuses on subject access points, such as personal, corporate, geographic, topical and uniform title headings, and locally defined thematic access of incunabula, which represents provenance of early printed books. The geographical organization of the collection is shown in the analysis that can identify the European printing centres of the 15th century especially Germany, France, Italy, and Poland. The thematic distribution shows that there was a preponderance of religious and theological literature, as well as philosophical literature and versions of antiquity.

The article shows that standardized MARC21 cataloging in combination with enhanced subject access improves researching, interoperability, and scholarly use of incunabula collections. Digitization and remote access are vital steps to the common cultural heritage maintenance in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Keywords: incunabula – historical book collections – MARC21 – metadata – subject analysis – subject access – ALIS Aleph – digital access – digital collection

Słowa kluczowe: inkunabuły – historyczne kolekcje książek – MARC21 – metadane – analiza przedmiotowa – dostęp przedmiotowy – system biblioteczny Aleph – dostęp cyfrowy – kolekcja cyfrowa

In 2024, the Vasyl Stefanyk National Scientific Library of Ukraine in Lviv launched a significant project to establish a problem-oriented database Incunabula Collection of the Vasyl Stefanyk National Scientific Library of Ukraine in Lviv. This initiative involved the detailed input of bibliographic metadata for incunabula into the automated library information system (ALIS) Aleph. Recognizing the unique nature of incunabula, their description required a specialized approach to annotation and bibliographic metadata citation. Following rigorous methodological guidelines, a dedicated MARC21 bibliographic description scheme was developed and implemented¹. This ensured standardized record entry and efficient data exchange, vital for integration into global catalogs. The project resulted in 55 bibliographic descriptions of incunabula from the Rare Books Department's collection. To facilitate international access, an English version of the electronic catalog page, „Other catalogs – Digital collections”, featuring the Incunabula Collection of the Vasyl Stefanyk Library, was created, offering quick access to full-text copies and bibliographic descriptions: http://aleph.lsl.lviv.ua:8991/F/?func=find-c&local_base=eincunabl&ccl_term=wr0%3Dalldocuments.

The object of this study is the incunabula collection of the Vasyl Stefanyk National Scientific Library of Ukraine in Lviv, represented by 55 bibliographic records created within the ALIS Aleph system. The research employs descriptive, analytical, and comparative methods to examine the structure and functionality of bibliographic metadata applied to early printed books.

The historiography of incunabula collection and detailed examination of the copy-specific features to Dr. Iryna Kachur (PhD in History, Senior Researcher for Rare-Book Department, Vasyl Stefanyk National Scientific Library of Ukraine in Lviv). Her study forms the base provenance analysis for this current cataloging project. Significant works include her study of the historical collection of the Ossolineum in the Vasyl Stefanyk Library („Inkunabuły z historycznej kolekcji Ossolineum w zbiorach Lwowskiej Narodowej Naukowej Biblioteki Ukrainy im. W. Stefanyka”, 2017)² and her extensive study of the primary provenance units („Collection of Incunabula from the Vasyl Stefanyk National Scientific Library of Ukraine in Lviv: main provenance

1 *The MARC 21 Format for Bibliographic Data, Library of Congress Network Development and Marc Standards Office*. 1999 Edition Update No. 1 (October 2000) through Update No. 41 (December 2025), [online] <https://www.loc.gov/marc/bibliographic/> [accessed 14.01.2026].

2 I. Kachur, *Inkunabuły z historycznej kolekcji Ossolineum w zbiorach Lwowskiej Narodowej Naukowej Biblioteki Ukrainy im. W. Stefanyka*, „Czasopismo Zakładu Narodowego imienia Ossolińskich” 2017, z. 28, pp. 41–52, [online] https://www.lsl.lviv.ua/index.php/en/scientific-publications/proceedings-of-vsnsf-of-ukraine-in-lviv/zp2018engkachur_i/ [accessed 18.02.2026].

stock-keeping units”, 2020)³. While Dr. Iryna Kachur focuses on the historical and bibliographical aspects, this study builds on her work by introducing bibliographic description and technical systematic cataloging in MARC21 and providing catalogued digital access.

The methodological framework based on detailed MARC21 cataloguing, with particular emphasis on subject access fields (6XX), local subject access fields (690), and local system fields supporting digital access and provenance description. The primary research tool is the ALIS Aleph, using the Books (BK) template adapted for incunabula description.

The criteria for analysis include the typology of subject headings (personal, corporate, geographic, topical, and uniform titles), their frequency and distribution, geographical and chronological representation, and thematic scope. Special attention given to locally defined access points reflecting provenance, copy-specific features, and historical context.

Building on that historical corps, the current initiative focused itself with technical aspects of systematic cataloguing and digital availability. The cataloguing was done „de visu” by the project team: Scientific Reseacher G. Melnyk-Khokha and Senior Researcher Dr. I. Kachur, which included thorough viewing of each physical volume. The bibliographic description follows international standards for early printed books (ISBD), utilizing the MARC21 format within the ALIS Aleph environment. The title and publication data were transcribed according to the principle of exact transcription (based on original spelling and punctuation) rather than normalization, which was intended to maintain a high-fidelity metadata. This approach ensures the highest level of bibliographic accuracy for early printed books were used fields (240–246). For publication data, the MARC21 fields (260) were used to record the place, printer and date. Bibliographical formats (for example, 2°, 4°, 8°) are consistently recorded in field (300), subfield (c), providing essential physical data often omitted in modernized catalogues, which is crucial for the correct identification of 15th-century editions. It result a total of 55 extensive bibliographic records, which are accessed in full-text via the digital incunabula collection. The physical scheme of the collection also reveals a distribution: 26 copies are folio (2°), 22 – quarto (4°) and 7 – octavo (8°).

This approach enables a comprehensive evaluation of subject access as a research and retrieval instrument for rare book collections.

3 I. Kachur, *Collection of Incunabula from the Vasyl Stefanyk National Scientific Library of Ukraine in Lviv: main provenance stock-keeping units*, „Z. Badań nad Książką i Księgozbiórami Historycznymi” 2020, vol. 14, № 2, pp. 213–233, [DOI] <https://doi.org/10.33077/uw.25448730.zbkh.2020.218> [accessed 18.02.2026].

The scientific novelty of this study lies in the development and practical validation of an integrated methodology for cataloguing and subject analysis of incunabula within the MARC21 framework, adapted to the specific characteristics of early printed books. The article proposes an original approach combining standardized subject headings with locally defined thematic access points that document provenance, physical features, and historical context⁴.

For the first time in Ukrainian library practice, a systematic subject analysis of an incunabula collection presented using MARC21 fields in the ALIS Aleph system, with a strong focus on international interoperability. The proposed model contributes to contemporary research on rare book metadata and may be applied by academic libraries in Central and Eastern Europe.

The library's electronic catalogue offers users many ways to search and sort at an advanced level. In search functions, users can specify different fields of bibliographic and copy-specific metadata. The database has extensive coverage and makes clear bibliographic metadata (title, personal name, printer, place and year of publication) and copy-specific metadata (donation details, provenance, collection, etc.). Also, e-catalogue supports additional search criteria, including subtitles, headings, subjects, personal headings and the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) index. This helps to organize and group documents, providing efficient remote access to the library's services.

Particular attention was given to the unique attributes of incunabula. Beyond standard bibliographic elements (identifier, title, author, dates, language, subject headings), the metadata includes unique information such as the copy's history, creation context, font peculiarities, detailed binding or book block descriptions, and the presence of marginalia and provenances. These details are crucial for in-depth research into the content and significance of these rare editions.

Consequently, a clear distinction was established between bibliographic metadata (title, printer, place, and year of publication) and copy-specific metadata (provenance, marginalia, binding anomalies, donor information, etc.). Provenance details were stored in local MARC21 fields (for example, 597 for provenance and 590 for local notes), adapted to the bibliographic standards of leading national libraries worldwide and aligned with current international trends, such as the Material Evidence in Incunabula (MEI) framework and the CERL Thesaurus. This reflects a shift from pure bibliography to the study of book biography, incorporating research on automation and the inclusion of

4 G. Melnyk-Khokha, *The role of metadata in the organization of access to the digital collections of the electronic library*, „Bulletin of the Book Chamber” 2024, no. 5, pp. 24–32, [In Ukr.], [DOI] [https://doi.org/10.36273/2076-9555.2024.5\(334\).24-32](https://doi.org/10.36273/2076-9555.2024.5(334).24-32) [accessed 14.01.2026].

copy-specific provenance history within automated library systems, such as ALIS Alma. However, the methods for creating bibliographic data in MARC21 format are limited by the current technical conditions and parameters of the automated library information system.

However, the methods for creating bibliographic data in MARC21 format are determined by the current technical parameters of the automated library information system. While there is a global trend toward adopting the RDA (Resource Description and Access) standard, its implementation in Ukraine is currently in the stage of translation of the RDA Toolkit and adaptation of methodological guidelines for the Ukrainian language by dedicated working groups. Furthermore, under the conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian war, practical integration remains limited by objective technical and resource constraints. Therefore, the MARC21 bibliographic description in ALIS Aleph, using the Books (BK) template, remains the primary functional framework for this project, and incorporates both established and additionally indexed fields (Illus. 1).

The following subject access fields were implemented in MARC21 via ALIS Aleph: [600] Subject – Personal Name; [610] Subject – Corporate Name; [611] Subject – Meeting Name; [630] Subject – Uniform Title; [650] Subject – Topical Term; [651] Subject – Geographic Name; [690] – Local Subject Access Fields.

An analysis was conducted on subject headings (6XX Fields), which provide personalized and thematic descriptions, local thematic access, and pertain to the historical period and geographical origin of the incunabula. Attention given to a specialized review of the headings list within the database of the Incunabula Collection of the Vasyl Stefanyk Library digital collection. Subject headings analysed based on criteria such as personal name, corporate name, meeting name, uniform title, topical term, and geographic name, as well as local thematic access headings, thereby capturing the unique historical characteristics of the editions.

The list of subject headings for the collection has been created by conducting analysis on the authority files in the electronic catalogue of Vasyl Stefanyk Library, which are coordinated with international subject control vocabularies such as the LCSH, as well as incorporating local thematic access points in incunabula collection. This includes personal, corporate, meeting and geographic names fields (600–651), as well as local thematic access headings field (690) that reflect the specific historical scope of the collection.

To enrich records with specific incunabula information, variable note fields (5XX) are actively used. These fields record citations, electronic versions, copy/version identification, binding details, and local notes on autographs and collections (590) and provenances (597).

References or citations to previously published bibliographic descriptions and indexes of the contents of the described documents are used to signal a citation or review of that identified document. These citations are given in a succinct manner using well-known and generally accepted abbreviations (for example, GW, ISTC, BMC etc.). The actual brief text of the published description is recorded in MARC21 field (510) Citation/Referentes Note to keep standard relation between local records and global incunabula bibliographic representations. All 55 copy-specific are recorded in the Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke, but their representation in other databases varies. As well, 55 of the catalogued copy-specific are recorded in the Incunabula Short Title Catalogue (ISTC). Through the registration of these copies and their provenance, this project greatly enlarges the global base for 15th century printing and allows a new (previously unrecorded) body of Ukrainian material to be accessed by an international audience.

Fields 6XX provide personalized and subject descriptions for local thematic access, while fields 700 offer additional access by authors, printers, and other responsible parties. Field 995 DRL employed for local subject access, generating an automatic URI identifier for direct access to the full incunabula description, including physical characteristics and electronic availability (Illus. 2).

An analysis of subject headings (Fields 6XX), which provide personalized and thematic access, focusing on the historical period and geographical origin of incunabula, was conducted. In total, 32 topogeographical subject headings identified, represented in 55 bibliographic records. The collection comprises 15th-century early printed books, including Latin and Cyrillic editions.

The collection's holdings originate from many key European centres of the 15th century. The detailed distribution by country and city is as follows:

Germany is the most represented country in the incunabula collection, indicating a significant number of German early printed books. This is logical, as Germany, particularly Mainz, considered the cradle of printing. Nuremberg and Cologne were also key centres of early printing, whose editions are widely represented in the collection. The general heading „Incunabula – Germany – 15th century” includes 11 positions, covering 22 records. Among the specified cities: Nuremberg is represented in 7 positions, corresponding to 9 records (1478, 1481, 1485, 1486, 1488, 1493, 1496); Cologne is noted in 3 records (1467, 1481, 1485); Mainz (1484) and Leipzig (1495) each have one position in the subject headings.

France ranks second in terms of the number of records. Strasbourg stands out as a primary printing center, indicating its important role in the dissemination of printing. The general heading „Incunabula – France – 15th century” includes nine positions, covering 11 records. Among the specified cities: Stras-

bourg represented in seven positions, corresponding to eight records (1484, 1487, 1488, 1495, 1496 and 1497); Paris mentioned in one record (1493).

Italy represented by a similarly significant number of headings as France. Among the specified cities, Venice, Rome, and Brescia predictably stand out as key cultural and religious centres that were primary cities for book printing in the 15th century. The general heading „Incunabula – Italy – 15th century” includes nine positions, covering 13 records. Among the specified cities: Venice is represented in six positions, corresponding to 10 records (1484, 1485, 1491, 1493, 1494, 1495, 1496, 1497-1498, 1499); Rome is mentioned in two records (15th century and 1500–1501); Brescia – in one record (1483) (Illus. 3).

Switzerland represented by a single city – Basel, which demonstrates its importance as a centre of book printing in the 15th century. The general heading „Incunabula – Switzerland – Basel – 15th century” includes one position, covering five records (1481, 1488, 1489, 1492 and 1494).

Belgium is represented by only one general record (1487), indicating the smallest number of Belgian incunabula in this collection. The general heading „Incunabula – Belgium – 15th century” includes one position in one record.

Poland, specifically Krakow (three records, 1493), highlights the presence of incunabula from Eastern Europe in the collection, serving as an important complement to the dominant Western European centres. Krakow was a significant cultural and scientific centre in the Middle Ages. The general heading „Incunabula – Poland – Krakow – 15th century” covers three records.

The most frequently assigned subject headings also reveal the thematic focus of the collection:

„*Early works to 1800*”: A general term indicating the publication period, frequently found in headings such as „Virtues – Early works to 1800”, „Sacraments – Catholicism – Early works to 1800”, „Suffering (Religion) – Early works to 1800”, „Christian Saints – 13th century – Early works to 1800”, „Christian Saints – Legends – Early works to 1800”, „Preaching – History – Early works to 1800”, „Liturgies – Commentaries – Early works to 1800” and „Religious literature – Early works to 1800”.

„*Texts*”: Indicates a direct relation to literary or philosophical works (e.g., „Philosophy, Ancient Roman – 1st–2nd centuries BCE – Texts”, „Poetry, Ancient Roman – Texts”, „Early Christian literature – Texts”).

„*1st–2nd centuries B.C.*”: Refers to the Ancient Roman period (e.g., „Philosophers, Ancient Roman – 1st–2nd centuries BCE”, „Philosophy, Ancient Roman – 1st–2nd centuries BCE – Texts”).

Specific Religious Figures and Works: Includes „Jesus Christ – Life”, „John, Apostle, Saint”, „Theotokos”, „Thomas Aquinas” and biblical references such as „Bible”, „Old Testament”, „Book of Psalms”, „New Testament

with Commentaries”. These reflect the strong religious orientation of part of the collection (e.g., „Jesus Christ – Life – Cult – Doctrines”, „John, Apostle, Saint – Cult”, „Theotokos – Cult”, „Thomas Aquinas – Doctrines”).

Thus, the most commonly used headings reflect the publication period (up to 1800), document type (texts), historical periods of the work (1st–2nd centuries B.C., 15th century), geographical origin (France, Germany), as well as religious and philosophical themes (Jesus Christ, Spiritual life, Virtues with subheadings such as Worship, Doctrines, History, Sacraments, Christianity) (Illus. 4).

These subject headings significantly aid researchers in navigating and utilizing the collection’s materials. The main thematic groups represented are:

Religion and Theology: This is a pivotal theme, encompassing Christian faith, the history of Catholicism, rituals, and the lives of saints.

Philosophy and Antiquity: The e-catalogue contains records related to Ancient Roman philosophy and authors, indicating the presence of classical works.

Historical and Geographical Information: Headings focusing on the origin and publication date of early printed books facilitate their identification.

Specific Authors and Works: The e-catalogue mentions prominent figures (e.g., Cicero, Claudius Ptolemy) and their works, alongside biblical texts.

The analysis of subject headings within the digital incunabula collection of the Vasyl Stefanyk National Scientific Library of Ukraine in Lviv underscores its significant value and representativeness. The collection effectively showcases European publishing activity of the 15th century, featuring early printed books from leading printing centres.

The most represented centres are Germany, France, and Italy, aligning with historical data on the development of printing. However, the inclusion of incunabula from Poland (Krakow) highlights a broader geographical representation, encompassing significant printing hubs in Central and Eastern Europe. Among the cities that are primary sources of incunabula in this collection, Nuremberg, Strasbourg, Venice, Basel, and Krakow stand out, offering a comprehensive understanding of the leading centres of early book printing in the 15th century and confirming their pivotal role in European culture.

The diversity of thematic headings, covering religion, philosophy, classical literature, and specific authors, attests to the collection’s multifaceted nature. It serves as an important resource for studying the history of printing, as well as the cultural and scientific processes of the Renaissance and early modern period.

The work undertaken demonstrates that the cataloguing of incunabula at the Vasyl Stefanyk National Scientific Library of Ukraine in MARC21 format is a crucial step in forming a modern, problem-oriented database, significantly expanding access to common cultural heritage. The application of ALIS

Aleph and detailed semantic and bibliographic metadata has ensured a high level of standardization in describing rare editions, facilitating their potential integration into international catalogues and enhancing interoperability. The developed and approved MARC21 scheme for bibliographic description of incunabula, along with the created bibliographic records, guarantees machine readability and data exchange, which substantially improves the quality of electronic resources and optimizes research activities.

The creation of a digital collection «Incunabula Collection of the Vasyl Stefanyk Library» of historical and cultural resources represents one of the most effective methods for preserving and ensuring access to common heritage. In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the digitalization and accessibility of the incunabula collection gain particular significance, contributing to the protection of unique documents from potential threats. Thus, the implemented project successfully combines innovative technologies with the mission of preserving and promoting common cultural heritage.

Scientific investigations into the specificity and importance of bibliographic metadata, their role in addressing digital metadata challenges, and defining key data categories for annotation have been highlighted in the works of I. Galić Bešker⁵, W. Karlak⁶, P. Manoni⁷, J. Moschella⁸ and remain within the scientific interests of researchers in the context of bibliographic data management. The importance of incunabula cataloguing and metadata implementation, as well as the effectiveness of organizing access to digital collections and distributed search, have been explored by G. Melnyk-Khokha⁹ in the following articles and conference abstracts.

5 I. Galić Bešker, *Bibliographic description of manuscripts and incunabula*, „Vjesnik bibliotekara Hrvatske” 2012, no 55(3–4), pp. 119–138, [online] <https://hrcak.srce.hr/106579> [accessed 14.01.2026].

6 W. Karlak, *Katalogowanie starych druków w formacie MARC21. Z doświadczeń bibliotek naukowych, współpracujących z narodowym katalogiem NUKAT*, „Bibliotheca Nostra. Śląski kwartalnik naukowy” 2009, no 2/2, pp. 26–34, [online] https://bazhum.muzhp.pl/media/texts/bibliotheca-nostra-slaski-kwartalnik-naukowy/2009-numer-2/bibliotheca_nostra_slaski_kwartalnik_naukowy-r2009-t2-n2-s26-34.pdf [accessed 14.01.2026].

7 P. Manoni, *The Digitization Project of the Vatican Library within the Complex Relationships between Sets of Metadata*, „Italian Research Conference on Digital Libraries”, Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2013. pp. 1–6, [DOI] https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-54347-0_1 [accessed 14.01.2026].

8 J. Moschella, *BPL Incunabula cataloging guidelines*, Boston 2022, [online] <https://share.google/PWXXst11BgLjwnw2q> [accessed 14.01.2026].

9 G. Melnyk-Khokha, V. Mudrokha, R. Bilousova, *Electronic Environment of the Scientific Library: Project Solutions to Support Modern Scientific and Educational Requests*, TPM-2025: VI International Workshop „IT Project Management”, CEUR-WS, 4023, pp. 71–80, [online] <https://ceur-ws.org/Vol-4023/paper7.pdf> [accessed 14.01.2026].

The analysis of subject access within the digital incunabula collection of the Vasyl Stefanyk National Scientific Library of Ukraine in Lviv confirms the scholarly value and representativeness of the collection. The geographical and thematic distribution of subject headings reflects the historical development of European printing in the 15th century, with a predominance of editions from Germany, France, Italy, and Poland.

The study demonstrates that detailed MARC21 cataloguing combined with enriched subject access significantly improves the discoverability and analytical potential of incunabula collections. The integration of standardized and local metadata elements ensures semantic richness while maintaining international compatibility.

In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, digitization and remote access to incunabula acquire particular importance as tools for safeguarding common cultural heritage. The presented methodology may serve as a reference model for similar rare book cataloguing projects in research libraries.

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List of illustrations

Illus. 1. Full bibliographic record of the incunabulum.

Liber de eo quod nemo laeditur ab alio nisi a semetipso fuerit laesus

by Ioannes Chrysostomus s. (Cologne, ca. 1470)

ALEPH system, showing physical copy details and the subject heading navigation window.

Screenshot: online catalog of the Vasyl Stefanyk National Scientific Library of Ukraine in Lviv



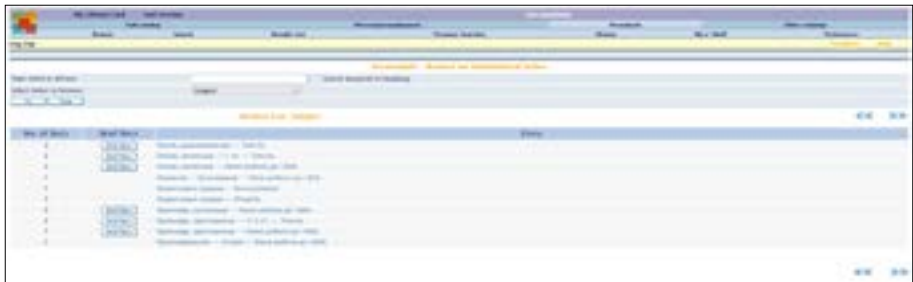
Illus. 2. Electronic catalogue record of the incunabulum *Modus confitendi* by Andreas de Escobar (Rome, ca. 1500–1501). ALEPH system, displaying metadata, the physical condition of the copy, and a link to the digital copy.

Screenshot: online catalog of the Vasyl Stefanyk National Scientific Library of Ukraine in Lviv



Illus. 3. The subject index browse interface of the Incunabuly database. ALEPH system, displaying a list of headings for religious texts (sermons, penance) and Latin poetry

Screenshot: online catalog of the Vasyl Stefanyk National Scientific Library of Ukraine in Lviv



Illus. 4. Full bibliographic record of the incunabulum.

Modus confitendi by Andreas de Escobar (Rome, ca. 1500–1501)

ALEPH system, showing physical copy details and the subject heading navigation window.

Screenshot: online catalog of the Vasyl Stefanyk National Scientific Library of Ukraine in Lviv



